
Jeremy Camburn opens Dickens' Novels as Poetry in the preface-less form we have come to expect from him – in medias res, and with two fragmented sentences: "Daniel and John (1846-8) to begin with, and poetry of the city. First, the construction of the railway, rendering the city of two, in a 'wild' natural process" (2). His introductory thoughts at once recall the rhetorical urgency already witnessed in Dickens, Violence and the Modern State (1995) and The Dickensian (2008). And, at the same time, they strike me immediately to the core of his current subject, particularly as this passage mirrors the opening of A Christmas Carol: "Marley was dead: to begin with" – which Camburn reads as a foreshadowing of the dead man's revenant return (117). We begin in the middle of things, this study suggests, because there is no beginning, no singular origin or truth; because doing so yields the familiar uncanniness of the unfamiliar (and vice versa); and because speech should be understood, from the very outset, as shadow-play. The richly unsettling effect of this critical approach underscores the central argument of Camburn's book: that the poetic language in Dickens, which emerges through various forms of allegory in the novels (dream, joke, riddle, fever, hallucination, caricature, slips of the tongue, everyday language), prevails the narrative articulation of a 'socialized, unified self' (20). Camburn follows Walter Benjamin in identifying allegory as 'precisely that which shows what cannot be uncoupled into a thread of thought' (23) – or, as Camburn writes elsewhere, that which is beyond, underneath, 'shifting, enigmatic, distorted' (60), and ultimately representative of what Freud calls the 'primary process.'

Camburn's Novels as Poetry reads as a stimulating conversation with a scholar markedly attuned to the peculiar rhythms and unconscious ties that distinguish the Dickens canon. The analysis is dense, sharp, and demanding; and by the end of the book I feel as though, by some brilliant trick, I have just re-read all the novels in the space of two-hundred pages, and with a newly re-shaped attention to their poetics of dissolution. I am still not sure if I must call Dickens a poet as opposed to, say, a poetic novelist in order to appreciate the allegorical pulse of his writing – but, in fact, this distinction does not seem finally to be the point. Readers should not expect to find in this lengthy literature review here (past scholarship on Dickens-as-poet is barely mentioned); and Camburn offers no thoroughgoing delineation of his own uses of the terms "prose" and "poetry" until one-third of the way into the book, when a few key lines from Heidegger and T. S. Eliot are invoked (75-6). What readers should expect is a lively and exhaustive post-structuralist analysis of the tension between intelligibility (associated with prose) and groundlessness (with poetry) in Dickens' language. They should look for this analysis to proceed with a discursive virtuosity that moves fluidly between impressively broad contextual readings (inter-novelistic, inter-generational, inter-genre) and painstakingly close attention to form (down to the very letter) and they should anticipate that Camburn, in ultra-deconstructive mode, often shows rather than tells – or, to use the language of the book itself, says without saying. Throughout the book provides explosive clusters of names, ideas, and images that call upon the reader – just as he claims Dickens does – to perform the "imaginary work" of supplying the often-unstated effect of the grouping (48, 50). Camburn uses the term "real" to characterize allegory in Dickens (cited above): I would use it to describe Camburn's own writing, which thrives on excess, as well as on the absences and disconnections that grow up organically amongst the accumulated materials of his research. This approach is at once stimulating and disorienting, as the labyrinthine associations drawn by the book can be difficult to parse – deliberately, meta-critically so, I think. Familiarity with Freud, Lacan, Heidegger and Benjamin (as well as Altman, Hegel, and Levinas, to a lesser extent) is a requirement, as is some knowledge of the great names of English literature (throughout, for instance, Camburn connects Dickens with Joyce and Shakespeare – Hamlet, especially). Part I ("Writing Styles: Romantic and Baroque") serves two primary purposes: first, it makes a case for Dickens as a well-informed and deeply allusive writer, who draws upon the literary history of his time – and, second, it claims that Dickens inherits from the baroque tradition of the previous generation the use of caricature, which, in turn, is the most distilled form of the novels in the figure of Quilp. The first chapter in this section will be of indispensible interest to those wanting to ascertain what Dickens read on his bookshelf, and to track moments in the novels when those other books make appearances, emerging often in faint, ghostly form as evidence of a literary unconscious in Dickens. Camburn writes here in response to the oft-cited 1872 review by C. H. Lewis that remarked upon the startling thinness of the author's personal library; while Camburn concudes that Dickens did possess the bibliomaniacal crudities of his age, he argues that the author possessed an uncanny "urban awareness" (32) and, indeed, revealed a sharp attentiveness to precisely those cultural phenomena – higher literature, especially – that Lewis had reported him to lack. Most compelling for me in the section are the connections Camburn draws between Dickens and the Romantics: the material on Wordsworth, Black Hours, and meta-poiesis is especially provocative (33 – 7). The material on Quilp in chapter 3 will be useful to those tracing monstrosity in Dickens; the significant contribution Camburn makes to this discussion
is the alignment—through the lens of Freud, Benjamin, Lacan and Adorno—of the grotesque with allegory. 

Part II ("Poetry and the City") and Part III ("Opening Words") deal explicitly with father-son relations and the element of narrative chronology most closely associated with them: the beginning of the story—i.e., the poet, the origin, the present that becomes (or already is) the past. The first two chapters draw on Lacan to interpret a poetry of absence in the early novels, in which urban types (Jingle, Weller, Mr. Gamp, Young Bailey) "bring out the deficiency in all language" through their use of jokes, non-sequiturs, and empty bragging speech (91). Tamblyn then shows how son-figures in subsequent novels are themselves marked by absence or deficiency: David Copperfield, like Pip and Paul Dombey, is said to be "a compound of himself and his father ... de-centered since he cannot know that other self, whose name authorises him but is narcissistic too" (124). This argument builds to a striking interpretation of autobiography in Dickens as a generic expression of the fateful state—most notably, the fateful state of the author himself, whose own need to self-identify in the space of the missing father, Tamblyn claims, understates all other utterances of loss in the novels. Most interesting to me in these two parts is the allusive but arresting focus on women in Dickens, who function even more essentially than the men as signs of groundlessness, fragmentation, unmasking: ghoulish mothers, emotionally-truncated spinster, aunts with unusual influence, and myriad sister-figures, all of whom are shown to dwell in the "land of dreams and shadows" (126). Tamblyn's review of these characters culminates in a close look at the composite figure of Esther Summerson, a once sister and narrator, whose autobiographical writing reveals most conspicuously how the unconscious self— and its associations with loss, distortion, and otherness—"cannot be kept out" (127).

Part IV ("Dickens and the Poetry of Dreams") reads dream imagery in the novels (walking-stones in Oliver Twist, temperamental memories in David Copperfield, and drug-induced doubling in The Mystery of Edwin Drood) as iterations of a drive towards trauma, death, and horror—and thus towards the sublimated self-like, figurative, condoned, distanced. Much as Benjamin talks about the arcades as conduits to an urban underworld, Tamblyn interposes dreams in Dickens as portals into the visibly unconscious—which, in turn, represents the mythic aspect of the nineteenth-century city and the destructive (death-driven) insanity and desire of its bourgeois culture (183). This section witnesses a return to considerations of Dickens and hallucination (already explored briefly in Part I), with extended research into mesmerism, hypnosis and dédoublement: these border states of consciousness, Tamblyn writes, "over the subject from his or her history and make rational prose rethink itself from its commitment to describing things sequentially, giving


"I am the street, strong," confesses George Augustus Sala in "Down Whitechapel Way," rejoicing in his journalistic rather than poetic stance; "I love to take long walks, not only down Fleet Street, but up and down all other streets, alleys, and lanes" (Household Words, November 1851, 120). Most successful journalists, one might surmise, are and have been urban creatures, whether strolling with Benjamin's flâneur on the boulevards of the era of high capitalism, or making forays over the border into the slums and ghettos of "the poor man's country," in Thackeray's cosmopolitan phrasing. The metaphorical and metonymic connections between streets and the literature of the nineteenth century have been articulated with great insight and skill by critics in the years since Walter Benjamin first likened London to a newspaper, and Dickens to its special correspondent for posterity.1 But journalists need editors, and editors cannot always be parroting the streets; editors need offices to arrive at, walk and sleep in, depart from, both early and late, yet much less attention has been paid to these connections by commentators, whether such offices


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